Chapter VIII - A Vocation

DINAH, who had risen when the gentlemen came in, but still kept hold of the sheet she was mending, curtsied respectfully when she saw Mr Irwine looking at her and advancing towards her. He had never yet spoken to her, or stood face to face with her, and her first thought, as her eyes met his, was, 'What a well-favoured countenance! Oh that the good seed might fall on that soil, for it would surely flourish.' The agreeable impression must have been mutual, for Mr Irwine bowed to her with a benignant deference, which would have been equally in place if she had been the most dignified lady of his acquaintance.

'You are only a visitor in this neighbourhood, I think?' were his first words, as he seated himself opposite to her.

'No, sir, I come from Snowfield, in Stonyshire. But my aunt was very kind, wanting me to have rest from my work there, because I'd been ill, and she invited me to come and stay with her for a while.'

'Ah, I remember Snowfield very well; I once had occasion to go there. It's a dreary bleak place. They were building a cotton-mill there; but that's many years ago now. I suppose the place is a good deal changed by the employment that mill must have brought.' 'It IS changed so far as the mill has brought people there, who get a livelihood for themselves by working in it, and make it better for the tradesfolks. I work in it myself, and have reason to be grateful, for thereby I have enough and to spare. But it's still a bleak place, as you say, sir - very different from this country.'

'You have relations living there, probably, so that you are attached to the place as your home?'

'I had an aunt there once; she brought me up, for I was an orphan. But she was taken away seven years ago, and I have no other kindred that I know of, besides my Aunt Poyser, who is very good to me, and would have me come and live in this country, which to be sure is a good land, wherein they eat bread without scarceness. But I'm not free to leave Snowfield, where I was first planted, and have grown deep into it, like the small grass on the hill-top.'

'Ah, I daresay you have many religious friends and companions there; you are a Methodist - a Wesleyan, I think?'

'Yes, my aunt at Snowfield belonged to the Society, and I have cause to be thankful for the privileges I have had thereby from my earliest childhood.'

‘And have you been long in the habit of preaching? For I understand you preached at Hayslope last night.’

‘I first took to the work four years since, when I was twenty-one.’

‘Your Society sanctions women's preaching, then?’

‘It doesn't forbid them, sir, when they've a clear call to the work, and when their ministry is owned by the conversion of sinners and the strengthening of God's people. Mrs. Fletcher, as you may have heard about, was the first woman to preach in the Society, I believe, before she was married, when she was Miss Bosanquet; and Mr Wesley approved of her undertaking the work. She had a great gift, and there are many others now living who are precious fellow-helpers in the work of the ministry. I understand there's been voices raised against it in the Society of late, but I cannot but think their counsel will come to nought. It isn't for men to make channels for God's Spirit, as they make channels for the watercourses, and say, 'Flow here, but flow not there.'‘

‘But don't you find some danger among your people - I don't mean to say that it is so with you, far from it - but don't you find sometimes that both men and women fancy themselves channels for God's Spirit, and are quite mistaken, so that they set about a work for which they are unfit and bring holy things into contempt?’

‘Doubtless it is so sometimes; for there have been evil-doers among us who have sought to deceive the brethren, and some there are who deceive their own selves. But we are not without discipline and correction to put a check upon these things. There's a very strict order kept among us, and the brethren and sisters watch for each other's souls as they that must give account. They don't go every one his own way and say, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'‘

‘But tell me - if I may ask, and I am really interested in knowing it - how you first came to think of preaching?’

‘Indeed, sir, I didn't think of it at all - I'd been used from the time I was sixteen to talk to the little children, and teach them, and sometimes I had had my heart enlarged to speak in class, and was much drawn out in prayer with the sick. But I had felt no call to preach, for when I'm not greatly wrought upon, I'm too much given to sit still and keep by myself. It seems as if I could sit silent all day long with the thought of God overflowing my soul - as the pebbles lie bathed in the Willow Brook. For thoughts are so great - aren't they, sir? They seem to lie upon us like a deep flood; and it's my besetment to forget where I am and everything about me, and lose myself in thoughts that I could give no account of, for I could neither make a

beginning nor ending of them in words. That was my way as long as I can remember; but sometimes it seemed as if speech came to me without any will of my own, and words were given to me that came out as the tears come, because our hearts are full and we can't help it. And those were always times of great blessing, though I had never thought it could be so with me before a congregation of people. But, sir, we are led on, like the little children, by a way that we know not. I was called to preach quite suddenly, and since then I have never been left in doubt about the work that was laid upon me.'

'But tell me the circumstances - just how it was, the very day you began to preach.'

'It was one Sunday I walked with brother Marlowe, who was an aged man, one of the local preachers, all the way to Hetton-Deeps - that's a village where the people get their living by working in the lead-mines, and where there's no church nor preacher, but they live like sheep without a shepherd. It's better than twelve miles from Snowfield, so we set out early in the morning, for it was summertime; and I had a wonderful sense of the Divine love as we walked over the hills, where there's no trees, you know, sir, as there is here, to make the sky look smaller, but you see the heavens stretched out like a tent, and you feel the everlasting arms around you. But before we got to Hetton, brother Marlowe was seized with a dizziness that made him afraid of falling, for he overworked himself sadly, at his years, in watching and praying, and walking so many miles to speak the Word, as well as carrying on his trade of linen-weaving. And when we got to the village, the people were expecting him, for he'd appointed the time and the place when he was there before, and such of them as cared to hear the Word of Life were assembled on a spot where the cottages was thickest, so as others might be drawn to come. But he felt as he couldn't stand up to preach, and he was forced to lie down in the first of the cottages we came to. So I went to tell the people, thinking we'd go into one of the houses, and I would read and pray with them. But as I passed along by the cottages and saw the aged and trembling women at the doors, and the hard looks of the men, who seemed to have their eyes no more filled with the sight of the Sabbath morning than if they had been dumb oxen that never looked up to the sky, I felt a great movement in my soul, and I trembled as if I was shaken by a strong spirit entering into my weak body. And I went to where the little flock of people was gathered together, and stepped on the low wall that was built against the green hillside, and I spoke the words that were given to me abundantly. And they all came round me out of all the cottages, and many wept over their sins, and have since been joined to the Lord. That was the beginning of my preaching, sir, and I've preached ever since.'

Dinah had let her work fall during this narrative, which she uttered in her usual simple way, but with that sincere articulate, thrilling treble by which she always mastered her audience. She stooped now to gather up her sewing, and then went on with it as before. Mr Irwine was deeply interested. He said to himself, 'He must be a miserable prig who would act the pedagogue here: one might as well go and lecture the trees for growing in their own shape.'

'And you never feel any embarrassment from the sense of your youth - that you are a lovely young woman on whom men's eyes are fixed?' he said aloud.

'No, I've no room for such feelings, and I don't believe the people ever take notice about that. I think, sir, when God makes His presence felt through us, we are like the burning bush: Moses never took any heed what sort of bush it was - he only saw the brightness of the Lord. I've preached to as rough ignorant people as can be in the villages about Snowfield - men that looked very hard and wild - but they never said an uncivil word to me, and often thanked me kindly as they made way for me to pass through the midst of them.'

'THAT I can believe - that I can well believe,' said Mr Irwine, emphatically. 'And what did you think of your hearers last night, now? Did you find them quiet and attentive?'

'Very quiet, sir, but I saw no signs of any great work upon them, except in a young girl named Bessy Cranage, towards whom my heart yearned greatly, when my eyes first fell on her blooming youth, given up to folly and vanity. I had some private talk and prayer with her afterwards, and I trust her heart is touched. But I've noticed that in these villages where the people lead a quiet life among the green pastures and the still waters, tilling the ground and tending the cattle, there's a strange deadness to the Word, as different as can be from the great towns, like Leeds, where I once went to visit a holy woman who preaches there. It's wonderful how rich is the harvest of souls up those high-walled streets, where you seemed to walk as in a prison-yard, and the ear is deafened with the sounds of worldly toil. I think maybe it is because the promise is sweeter when this life is so dark and weary, and the soul gets more hungry when the body is ill at ease.'

'Why, yes, our farm-labourers are not easily roused. They take life almost as slowly as the sheep and cows. But we have some intelligent workmen about here. I daresay you know the Bedes; Seth Bede, by the by, is a Methodist.'

'Yes, I know Seth well, and his brother Adam a little. Seth is a gracious young man - sincere and without offence; and Adam is like

the patriarch Joseph, for his great skill and knowledge and the kindness he shows to his brother and his parents.'

'Perhaps you don't know the trouble that has just happened to them? Their father, Matthias Bede, was drowned in the Willow Brook last night, not far from his own door. I'm going now to see Adam.'

'Ah, their poor aged mother!' said Dinah, dropping her hands and looking before her with pitying eyes, as if she saw the object of her sympathy. 'She will mourn heavily, for Seth has told me she's of an anxious, troubled heart. I must go and see if I can give her any help.'

As she rose and was beginning to fold up her work, Captain Donnithorne, having exhausted all plausible pretexts for remaining among the milk-pans, came out of the dairy, followed by Mrs. Poyser. Mr Irwine now rose also, and, advancing towards Dinah, held out his hand, and said, 'Good-bye. I hear you are going away soon; but this will not be the last visit you will pay your aunt - so we shall meet again, I hope.'

His cordiality towards Dinah set all Mrs. Poyser's anxieties at rest, and her face was brighter than usual, as she said, 'I've never asked after Mrs. Irwine and the Miss Irwines, sir; I hope they're as well as usual.'

'Yes, thank you, Mrs. Poyser, except that Miss Anne has one of her bad headaches to-day. By the by, we all liked that nice cream-cheese you sent us - my mother especially.'

'I'm very glad, indeed, sir. It is but seldom I make one, but I remembered Mrs. Irwine was fond of 'em. Please to give my duty to her, and to Miss Kate and Miss Anne. They've never been to look at my poultry this long while, and I've got some beautiful speckled chickens, black and white, as Miss Kate might like to have some of amongst hers.'

'Well, I'll tell her; she must come and see them. Good-bye,' said the rector, mounting his horse.

'Just ride slowly on, Irwine,' said Captain Donnithorne, mounting also. 'I'll overtake you in three minutes. I'm only going to speak to the shepherd about the whelps. Good-bye, Mrs. Poyser; tell your husband I shall come and have a long talk with him soon.'

Mrs. Poyser curtsied duly, and watched the two horses until they had disappeared from the yard, amidst great excitement on the part of the pigs and the poultry, and under the furious indignation of the bull-dog, who performed a Pyrrhic dance, that every moment seemed to

threaten the breaking of his chain. Mrs. Poyser delighted in this noisy exit; it was a fresh assurance to her that the farm-yard was well guarded, and that no loiterers could enter unobserved; and it was not until the gate had closed behind the captain that she turned into the kitchen again, where Dinah stood with her bonnet in her hand, waiting to speak to her aunt, before she set out for Lisbeth Bede's cottage.

Mrs. Poyser, however, though she noticed the bonnet, deferred remarking on it until she had disburdened herself of her surprise at Mr Irwine's behaviour.

'Why, Mr Irwine wasn't angry, then? What did he say to you, Dinah? Didn't he scold you for preaching?'

'No, he was not at all angry; he was very friendly to me. I was quite drawn out to speak to him; I hardly know how, for I had always thought of him as a worldly Sadducee. But his countenance is as pleasant as the morning sunshine.'

'Pleasant! And what else did y' expect to find him but pleasant?' said Mrs. Poyser impatiently, resuming her knitting. 'I should think his countenance is pleasant indeed! And him a gentleman born, and's got a mother like a picter. You may go the country round and not find such another woman turned sixty-six. It's summat-like to see such a man as that i' the desk of a Sunday! As I say to Poyser, it's like looking at a full crop o' wheat, or a pasture with a fine dairy o' cows in it; it makes you think the world's comfortable-like. But as for such creaturs as you Methodisses run after, I'd as soon go to look at a lot o' bare-ribbed runts on a common. Fine folks they are to tell you what's right, as look as if they'd never tasted nothing better than bacon-sword and sour-cake i' their lives. But what did Mr Irwine say to you about that fool's trick o' preaching on the Green?'

'He only said he'd heard of it; he didn't seem to feel any displeasure about it. But, dear aunt, don't think any more about that. He told me something that I'm sure will cause you sorrow, as it does me. Thias Bede was drowned last night in the Willow Brook, and I'm thinking that the aged mother will be greatly in need of comfort. Perhaps I can be of use to her, so I have fetched my bonnet and am going to set out.'

'Dear heart, dear heart! But you must have a cup o' tea first, child,' said Mrs. Poyser, falling at once from the key of B with five sharps to the frank and genial C. 'The kettle's boiling - we'll have it ready in a minute; and the young uns 'ull be in and wanting theirs directly. I'm quite willing you should go and see th' old woman, for you're one as is allays welcome in trouble, Methodist or no Methodist; but, for the matter o' that, it's the flesh and blood folks are made on as makes the

difference. Some cheeses are made o' skimmed milk and some o' new milk, and it's no matter what you call 'em, you may tell which is which by the look and the smell. But as to Thias Bede, he's better out o' the way nor in - God forgi' me for saying so - for he's done little this ten year but make trouble for them as belonged to him; and I think it 'ud be well for you to take a little bottle o' rum for th' old woman, for I daresay she's got never a drop o' nothing to comfort her inside. Sit down, child, and be easy, for you shan't stir out till you've had a cup o' tea, and so I tell you.'

During the latter part of this speech, Mrs. Poyser had been reaching down the tea-things from the shelves, and was on her way towards the pantry for the loaf (followed close by Totty, who had made her appearance on the rattling of the tea-cups), when Hetty came out of the dairy relieving her tired arms by lifting them up, and clasping her hands at the back of her head.

'Molly,' she said, rather languidly, 'just run out and get me a bunch of dock-leaves: the butter's ready to pack up now.'

'D' you hear what's happened, Hetty?' said her aunt.

'No; how should I hear anything?' was the answer, in a pettish tone.

'Not as you'd care much, I daresay, if you did hear; for you're too feather-headed to mind if everybody was dead, so as you could stay upstairs a-dressing yourself for two hours by the clock. But anybody besides yourself 'ud mind about such things happening to them as think a deal more of you than you deserve. But Adam Bede and all his kin might be drownded for what you'd care - you'd be perking at the glass the next minute.'

'Adam Bede - drowned?' said Hetty, letting her arms fall and looking rather bewildered, but suspecting that her aunt was as usual exaggerating with a didactic purpose.

'No, my dear, no,' said Dinah kindly, for Mrs. Poyser had passed on to the pantry without deigning more precise information. 'Not Adam. Adam's father, the old man, is drowned. He was drowned last night in the Willow Brook. Mr Irwine has just told me about it.'

'Oh, how dreadful!' said Hetty, looking serious, but not deeply affected; and as Molly now entered with the dock-leaves, she took them silently and returned to the dairy without asking further questions.